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SUBJECT: Consular Outreach Initiative in Mongolia Pays Off,  
Suggesting Useful "Lessons Learned" for Other Posts

¶1. (SBU) SUMMARY: A close review of consular statistics from Mongolia for the last three years suggests that post's Consular outreach efforts have achieved good results. The program, launched in 2008, helped shape a higher quality applicant pool, increased awareness about legal avenues for immigration and reduced visa fraud. As a result, the number of patently unqualified applicants declined by approximately 50 percent while the number of applications from qualified students and exchange visitors as well as business/tourist travelers expanded. We also increased awareness of the diversity visa program while reducing the number of confirmed visa fraud cases by 17 percent. In addition, the outreach initiative improved understanding among the Mongolian public on how the American visa process works and changed Mongolian perceptions about the U.S. embassy. From our perspective, such outreach efforts offer a cost-effective way to mitigate the impacts of a high refusal rate. The purpose of this cable is to describe and assess our outreach efforts, with a view toward providing "lessons learned" that may be of interest to Consular Affairs as well as other posts.  
END SUMMARY

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Background  
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¶2. (SBU) Mongolia in 2007 was a high fraud post and had one of the highest refusal rates in the world. The typical applicant was young, single, and unemployed with no prior travel but a strong interest in long-term English language training. In reality, the real motivation in most cases was to work in the United States while possibly taking some ESL classes at night. These applicants spent at least \$350 on the application process, wasting our time and their money. Perhaps not surprisingly, the high refusal rate led to a widespread and discouraging belief among many Mongolians that it would be impossible ever to visit the U.S. It also contributed to fraud and fostered a cynical attitude among many Mongolians about the U.S. Embassy as well as the United States.

¶3. (SBU) In 2008, the Consular Section, fully staffed with two experienced consular officers, responded to this negative situation by launching a robust public outreach initiative to inform the Mongolian public, provide accurate information and respond to misinformation. The Embassy outreach strategy, developed and supported by both the Consular Section and the Public Affairs Office, had three main goals: (1) shape the applicant pool and improve its quality; (2) increase awareness of legal avenues of immigration; and (3) reduce fraud. Using a mix of speaking engagements, media outreach, and paid advertising, the outreach effort achieved a very positive impact, resulting in a lower refusal rate and an improved work environment.

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Goal 1: Shape and Improve the Applicant Pool  
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14. (SBU) Our primary goal was to shape the applicant pool by discouraging obviously unqualified student applicants while encouraging more qualified ones. In 2007, over 80 percent of all student visa applicants were unqualified, leading to a very high refusal rate which in turn fostered negative attitudes toward the Embassy.

15. (SBU) The outreach effort initially focused on students who made up the largest pool of unqualified applicants. Responding to this concern, Consular officials spoke at every single major university in Ulaanbaatar at least once, reaching several thousand students in groups ranging from large audiences involving as many as 400 students to smaller settings with as few as 20 students. We also spoke at the American Corner, participated in several student fairs, visited colleges and universities in the farthest corners of the country, and created and distributed a Mongolian language brochure detailing options for students wishing to visit or study in the United States. In cooperation with the Embassy's commercial section, we also reached out to Mongolia's business community, addressing a variety of key business groups as well.

16. (SBU) Media outreach formed an important part of the strategy and significantly extended its impact. With support from the Public Affairs Office, we extended invitations to journalists to attend every outreach event. In addition, Consular officials gave countless interviews involving both short "question and answer" sessions as well as longer private discussions for both print and broadcast journalists. Finally, a bi-weekly "Ask the Consul" column was introduced, providing an important outlet for spreading accurate information in one of the country's leading Mongolian language newspapers.

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Goal 2: Highlight Legal Immigration Options  
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17. (SBU) Our second goal was to raise awareness about legal immigration channels and opportunities for working in the United States. The vast majority of applicants viewed student and tourist visas as their primary and perhaps only avenue for immigrating to the United States. We wanted to disabuse potential applicants of this notion, turning the focus instead toward legal immigration mechanisms such as the Diversity Visa (DV) program. By sharing information about this program, we wanted to make it more difficult for unscrupulous visa brokers to prey on Mongolians who lacked information about the U.S. visa process.

18. (SBU) We started by reworking our website for the DV lottery, making it easier for interested Mongolians to find relevant information. We then hired a locally available videographer and produced a 30-second commercial highlighting the DV lottery. During the registration period, we issued a press release about the program, placed a paid ad in several newspapers and, with Public Affairs assistance, ran the commercial on every single major television station. The advertising led to several additional media requests including a 45-minute nationwide call-in television program and a three-page print interview.

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Goal 3: Reduce Fraud and Use of Visa Brokers  
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19. (SBU) Our third goal was to reduce fraud in visa applications and especially reduce the use of visa brokers. In 2007, 44 percent of all fraud investigations revealed fraud, resulting in more than 100 people being banned for life from the United States. Even otherwise qualified applicants would hire visa brokers to assist with the process and submit fraudulent materials. Indeed, according to popular perception the only way to obtain an American visa was to engage in fraud. The rampant fraud, driven by a combination of misinformation, desperation, and recruitment by visa brokers, also made the visa adjudication process much more problematic.

110. (SBU) Our outreach efforts explicitly addressed the issue of fraud. For example, an anti-fraud warning was included in every outreach event as well as in all published material. Some initiatives focused specifically on fraud while others, such as the

commercial on the DV program, included a clear warning about the dangers of using visa brokers. Fraud warnings featured prominently in the visa section of the Embassy website. In an effort to be pro-active, we also placed classified ads warning about visa fraud in several Mongolian language newspapers that regularly featured advertisements by visa brokers feeding on the hopes and dreams of Mongolians desperate to reach the United States.

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Outreach Pays Off - Evidence for Its Efficacy  
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¶11. (SBU) As a result of this outreach effort, the number of unqualified Mongolian students applying for visas has gone down by some 67 percent: in 2007, 3,308 Mongolians had their applications for student visas refused, compared to 1,099 during 2009. The decrease occurred while the number of qualified student applicants remained constant, suggesting that the change was rooted in better self-selection rather than any changes in the adjudication process.

¶12. (SBU) The outreach initiative also helped shape a better quality applicant pool for other visa categories. For example, our outreach to students attracted more qualified exchange applicants: some 500 qualified exchange students applied for visas in 2009, compared to only 169 in 2008. Similarly, while the total number of regular visa applicants (tourist/business) remained steady, the number of qualified applicants increased by 70 percent, from 1,901 approved applicants in 2007 to 3,201 in 2009. During the same period, the number of unqualified applications was reduced by 43 percent, from 4,503 in 2007 to 2,340 in 2009. While it is harder to attribute this solely to outreach, since B visa adjudications are more subjective, there is little doubt that the quality of the visa applicant pool in Mongolia has improved. Overall, the Consular outreach program reduced the number of disappointed consular applicants by 50 percent, resulting in 4,000 fewer refused applicants; at the same time, it increased by 50 percent the number of individuals who could legitimately travel to the US by approximately 50 percent, resulting in 1,500 more approved visas.

¶13. (SBU) Our second goal was to raise awareness about legal immigration channels and opportunities for working in the United States. Our efforts benefitted from very broad media coverage, ensuring that the public became well aware of the DV program. While

we do not have access to the total number of Mongolian DV entries, we increased visits to the Embassy's web page on the "Green Card Lottery" by almost 400 percent from 2008 to 2009. Other than the Embassy's homepage, the Green Card Lottery page was the most visited page throughout the application period.

¶14. (SBU) Our third goal was to reduce visa fraud and abuse. While hard to quantify, we believe that fraud levels have been significantly reduced since 2007. Even though we conducted 43 percent more fraud investigations, the total number of confirmed cases of fraud was actually reduced: in 2007, we identified fraud in 140 of 317 fraud investigations; by contrast, in 2009 we identified fraud in 116 of 453 fraud investigations. We also reduced the number of applicants found ineligible due to fraud, with the number declining from 109 in 2007 to 33 in 2009. These decreases occurred despite the creation of an in-house Fraud Prevention Unit and improved fraud screening. Similarly, our Surveillance Detection Team reported less activity by visa brokers in and around the Embassy grounds. While inexact, these figures clearly support our belief that that visa fraud in Mongolia has declined.

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Lessons Learned  
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¶15. (SBU) COMMENT: The Mongolia visa experience points to at least three main lessons learned that may be of interest to other posts facing a similar situation:

¶16. First, identify specific goals early and then stay on message: We identified specific and concrete goals for our outreach and then directed our efforts towards achieving those goals. The goals determined the target audience as well as specific outreach efforts. Even in a country with a small population such as Mongolia, it was

hard to reach our intended audience. Most notably, it required repeating the same few points over and over again for many different audiences and in a variety of settings, thus ensuring the basic message eventually broke through. Consular officials delivered more than 20 speeches to several thousand students representing all major universities in Mongolia. We also gave countless TV, radio and print interviews; organized advertising, both paid and unpaid; distributed press releases; and revised our website to ensure that it also advanced our key objectives. In each case, the message directly promoted the three over-arching goals that had been set at the outset. By identifying our goals early and focusing our efforts towards those goals, we ensured that a consistent message was delivered to many audiences.

¶17. (SBU) Second, present the same basic message in a variety of ways: While it is important to stay on message, we found that we had to repackage our stories or speeches to ensure continued coverage among an expanded audience. For example, when a television program requested comment on a Mongolian student who won a scholarship to the U.S. and was issued a visa, we used the opportunity to both congratulate the student while also highlighting key student visa requirements. Efforts like this were useful in reaching a different segment of the Mongolian population. In-country travel also proved very effective. While each trip was keyed to a speech or outreach event and received blanket coverage in the region, we also used the travel to reiterate our core message. For example, after one trip to a remote region we worked with the media to formulate a human interest story about how the American consul traveled to the region to discuss the pressing issue of student visa requirements. The story thus reflected and re-enforced our core message while doing it with a new twist.

¶18. (SBU) Third, be proactive: While working closely with the Public Affairs Section, it was also important for the Consular section to look for ways to be proactive. We found it useful to identify our own ideas and outreach opportunities and then work with Public Affairs to develop and refine them. For example, some of our most successful efforts such as television commercials, the "Ask the Consul" column and exchange visa brochures were initiated from within the Consular section. While PAS was critical in terms of implementation, the Consular section made an essential contribution by first voicing the idea and then suggesting possible partners. For its part, PAS was especially helpful in identifying key press contacts, reworking consular materials into a press friendly format, and working with regional media.

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Conclusion  
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¶19. (SBU) A sustained outreach effort requires a significant commitment of time and resources. However, in the case of Mongolia, this was an investment that paid off. As a result, we shaped an

improved applicant pool while highlighting legal immigration mechanisms and reducing visa fraud. Previously, our refusal rate was a source of friction and tension in the bilateral relationship, leading to negative Mongolian perceptions about the United States. While we cannot change visa standards, we can and did change the impact of those necessarily strict standards in terms of how they are perceived and understood by the Mongolian public. The Mongolian government has noted and expressed appreciation for our efforts, most notably during a recent meeting with the Ambassador when a senior advisor to the Prime Minister specifically thanked the Embassy for the improvements that he himself had witnessed over time. From our perspective, the outreach effort was a notable success, one that we intend to continue into 2010 and beyond. End comment.

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